

## The American Road Trip: A Battle for Relevance and Sacrifice in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

by Julie Breeden

America is a vast, diverse landscape peopled by a vastly diverse group of residents. Fixing an identity to America, or defining what it means to be an American is nearly an impossible task. In *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman explores how the landscape, mythology, and people of America collide to form “a type national identity.” Newly released from prison Shadow Moon, the protagonist, sets out on a quest across the country with a washed up god of Norse mythology who goes by “Wednesday.” As Shadow discovers his identity, so too is the identity of America revealed. Gaiman develops a story of gods, brought to America and representing the cultures of the immigrants who brought them and now waning in relevance. These immigrant gods are battling with the new gods of this new world for power and place. As Wednesday seeks to rally these disparate old gods to do battle with the new gods, he and Shadow traverse the heartland of America and explore the national identity in small towns and at roadside attractions. Through this overarching travel narrative, an exploration of the text shows America to be a unique identity born of inherited values that are discarded in favor of new aspirations developed in a landscape that shapes our spirituality and personal lives.

*American Gods* uses old world gods to show that our national identity is formed by people from many places who are leaving behind their places of origin and assimilating to life in America. Olesen claims that the motto of the United States, ‘E Pluribus Unum,’ is reliant on “Americans abandoning the traditional delineations of the ‘Old World’ ethnicity and becoming something new and ambiguous in the ‘New World’” (Olesen 117). This process is the interplay between new inhabitants and the American identity. Immigrants bring with them their old-world customs, ethnicity, and identity. Over time these comfortable ways are discarded in favor of the ever-evolving American mores either through assimilation to the new world, or the new world’s incorporation of immigrant ways into a dynamic American ideal. This new version of America takes on an updated identity of its own as the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and comfortable old ways, personified as old gods are discarded.

The inhabitants of America are all from someplace else in Gaiman's novel with even the indigenous and native people depicted as crossing the Bering Strait in 14,000 BC to arrive in the new world. These native people brought with them the god Nunyunnini, "who was the skull of a mammoth, and the hide of a mammoth fashioned into a rough cloak" (Gaiman 366). After eating the "*pungh* mushrooms," and stepping into the skull and cloak of the god, Nunyunnini would speak to them. As years went on, and these peoples spread across the land. They became separate tribes, and "soon Nunyunnini was entirely forgot" (Gaiman 371). This short vignette represents a model story of all the immigrants to America. They arrived in a strange new place and clung to their old gods. Eventually as generations passed and people spread across the land their old gods were forgotten.

Gaiman focuses on the gods and the beliefs they represent. According to Olesen, Gaiman "does not address the American assimilation of immigrants in terms of ethnic assimilation, but in the more nebulous and intriguing context of religious and mythological assimilation" (Olesen 119). Olesen therefore believes the novel's focus is a portrayal of gods as representations of beliefs capable of being forgotten and therefore left behind. Americans are assimilating to the new world in an abstract philosophical way. However, ethnic assimilation is an obvious challenge of this process as Shadow's ethnic identity is questioned throughout the novel. First by a prison guard, "And what are you? A [s\*\*c]? A [gy\*\*y]?" "Not that I know of, sir. Maybe." "Maybe you got [n\*\*\*\*r] blood in you. You got [n\*\*\*\*r] blood in you, Shadow?" and Shadow replies "Could be, sir" (Gaiman 11). Even Shadow is unclear about his ethnic background as are many Americans. Shadow's quest with Wednesday to rally the old gods in opposition to the new gods is also about belief and relevance. The old gods were not only forgotten, but replaced by new gods.

There are new gods growing in America, clinging to growing knots of belief: gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon. Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance. (Gaiman 123)

The old gods are fighting for survival against new gods that are more relevant to the current American experience. Within that quest for survival Shadow will also discover the roots of his identity, showing that both religious and ethnic origins as well as contemporary

values shape American identity. All these things are foundational to shaping America, and as Olesen states, “The political conclusion to draw from the narrative is that the sharp edges of Old World religions and mythologies need to be smoothed away in order for individuals to be able to stand safely next to one another as Americans” (123). This reinforces the idea, *E Pluribus Unim*, out of many, one. Out of the many ideologies, eventually one will be created and this is necessary to stand together as one nation. Also necessary to bring people together, is a shared experience and location as depicted in the roadside attractions in the novel.

Roadside attractions are part of America and Gaiman uses them in *American Gods* to create places with significant meaning shared across cultures and tied to the American landscape. As Wednesday and Shadow pass a signpost for Mt. Rushmore, Wednesday comments, “‘Now that,’ he said, ‘is a holy place’” (Gaiman 299). Mt. Rushmore is a national monument, and a roadside attraction, but a “holy place?” Shadow responds that, “I know it used to be sacred to the Indians” and Wednesday replies, “That’s the American Way—they need to give people an excuse to come and worship. These days, people can’t just go and see a mountain” (Gaiman 299). The American way is to take places that are sacred and create a seemingly secular attraction in that location. The mountain is already a holy place, but it is a holy place to Native Americans. By transforming this already sacred place into a national monument it becomes something of significance to all people, or at least more people. It becomes a sacred place for all Americans. Roadside attractions in the novel are significant places that are transformed into spaces to create a shared experience among people from different backgrounds. They are locations now linked to national identity.

Gaiman further complicates this idea of roadside attractions becoming a place of identity when the gods retreat to the center of the country to declare a truce in their war and collect the body of the recently killed Wednesday. Since roadside attractions create a tie to the new god of money for a region, local residents calculated the center of the country and attempted to create a new roadside attraction. This conscious attempt to make money is at its core an unconscious act of devotion to the new god of money. Surely the center of this vast nation would embody the real America and people would come to experience it. As it turned out, the center of the country was located on a pig farm and not even the construction of a hotel and church could make it appealing to tourists in search of an authentic American

experience. It was, however, useful to the gods. “We are at the center of this place: a land that has no time for gods, and here at the center it has less time for us than anywhere. It’s a no-man’s land, a place of truce, and we observe our truces here” (Gaiman 398). This irrelevant roadside attraction is tied to the gods in its lack of meaning. There was nothing of inherent devotional value there; hence, nothing built upon this place could create an outward symbol of shared meaning to draw the devoted and the merely curious alike. An uninteresting roadside attraction also brings no revenue and as such does not cultivate itself as appealing to the new gods of consumerism. Therefore, as the old gods begin to lose their value and their meaning, they, too, are able to utilize that location. It is a no-man’s land. The new gods have no power because it is not a consumer-driven place. It is devoid of retail opportunities. The old gods have no power there because there is nothing sacred attached to the location. It’s neutral ground. They are useless gods taking a break from a useless war in a useless place.

The road trip structure of the story and its progression reinforces the idea that Americans draw their national identity not only from their place of origin or their current homes, but also from a collection of places they have been or created. Each individual American’s identity contains the complexity of the larger abstract idea of an American identity. “Shadow seems to be on track to finding his identity: surely somewhere in the many small towns, big cities, and roadside attractions that he is about to visit, he will find a place to which he feels he belongs” (Carroll 319). Carroll’s description of Shadow follows the arch of a protagonist who searches for his place in the world. Shadow and his search for his place reflects a broader search for the spiritual heart of America. His story begins with his release from prison and his journey home to Eagle Point, Indiana. However, that is not his home. “I didn’t really ever have a life here. I was never in one place too long as a kid, and I didn’t get here until I was in my twenties. So this town is Laura’s” (Gaiman 66). Shadow mirrors the immigrant experience. He is from someplace he is not really from and doesn’t feel tied to. He knows that it is Laura’s place and that is why he incorporated it into his place, but without her he is untethered. His home does not exist in this location. Therefore, he feels free to take up with Wednesday and explore the country.

However, when Shadow develops his own identity and discovers the identity of America, the old gods become less important and die out on their own. It is this dynamic movement forward is central to the American experience. Shadow discovers it in his visits along the

way as Wednesday is trying to rally the old gods who know all too well the futility of trying to maintain the old ways. In Cairo, Il., Shadow meets Ibis and Jacquiel, ancient Egyptian gods practicing their skills in embalming working in a funeral home. Jacquiel tells him, "Fighting isn't going to change a damn thing." The fight for relevance is already over and the effort to stem the tide is futile. "America just didn't care that we arrived. So we get bought out, or we press on, or we hit the road" (Gaiman 185). Jacquiel is talking directly about selling the funeral home, but the idea of selling-out and giving-in to the machine of American culture's new god of money is the spiritual conundrum facing all immigrants represented by the gods. How much of the old ways can be held when faced with the wave of newness that is the constant reinvention of America? America requires that we "press on" moving forward in the common direction or "hit the road" and leave it all behind which isn't really a viable option.

This reality of capitulation to the new gods and giving up the fight is further reinforced by Wednesday and Shadow's visit with Whiskey Jack and Apple Johnny. Jack explains to Wednesday that the old gods will lose and have already lost, "Like the white man and my people. They won, and when they lost, they made treaties. Then they broke the treaties" (Gaiman 309). Even a win against the forces of change can never be a win because change happens anyway, win, or lose. It simply isn't worth the fight. There is a glimmer of hope in the idea of playing the long game and remaining in place. Wednesday, Shadow, and Johnny Chapman accept a ride from a woman when they leave Whiskey Jack and go to pick up a car. She complains about the condition of the roads and tells them that the white population in the badlands is waning. "How you going to keep them down on the farm, after they seen the world on their television screens?" she asks, speculating that they are moving to big cities and "maybe if we wait. . . we can take the whole of the middle back without a fight" (Gaiman 314). The white population conquered the natives and imposed their ways, but now converted by the new god of media, they leave the badlands for the cities of "New York and Miami and L.A." The native population is left on the reservation and the surrounding areas are discarded by yet another wave of reinvention and change. This creates a cynical hope that if values are held long enough to remain after assault from the new gods they can remain in place and perhaps be reclaimed but this is unlikely.

If Shadow Moon is fully an American, he is the product not only of his ethnicity, but also the places he has been, and the

experiences that he has had. What, then, defines this identity in terms of values? The premise of Gaiman's novel is that over time Americans discard their old gods, their old values, in exchange for new gods that represent new American values. However, it isn't that simple. Gaiman also forces readers to wrestle with a question even larger than "What do we value?" He asks, "What are we willing to sacrifice for those values?" Gaiman explores American's willingness to sacrifice others by putting Shadow in the idyllic town of Lakeside, WI. Shadow arrives there on a cold winter's night and is welcomed first by old-timer Hinzemann and then by Sheriff Chad Mulligan. They save him from the cold, and the sheriff chauffeurs him around the quaint town. Mulligan introduces Shadow to a diner, grocery store, library and to neighboring local residents, all welcoming and friendly. Shadow even learns from Hinzemann that there is a local charity fundraiser where residents place bets on when an old klunker will fall through the ice of a frozen lake. Lakeside seems almost too good to be true. Lakeside is fictional, "yet readers of this fantasy novel want Lakeside to exist" (La Jeunesse 45). So much so, in fact, that online searches for Lakeside reveal several pages where people speculate on where it might be and if they have found it. Readers are literally searching for Lakeside. This supports Carroll's belief that there is a collectively held abstract concept of the "real America" that is an ideal small town where life is somehow better. The people are nicer and the living is pleasant. Americans want this to be true, and they are searching for it. Gaiman places this mythic utopia in Wisconsin. Wisconsin, America's dairy land, symbolizes a purity of life, pure as the nutritious richness of milk. This small town, on the shore of a crystal lake exists in the heart of flyover country, a part of the nation left behind. The idea that people are searching for Lakeside is disturbing. If the people searching are readers of *American Gods*, then do they not realize that this fantasy ideal is built on a morally unacceptable sacrifice of children to the old god Hinzemann? Gaiman is showing readers the human cost of the ideal "real American" life, but, yet they still aspire to the corrupt fantasy.

Gaiman foreshadows the coming sacrifice by using the idea of sacrifice in small ways throughout *American Gods*. Early in the book in "Somewhere in America," an aspiring producer sacrifices himself for pleasure in worship of Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, who has begun prostituting herself as her old-god relevance has declined (Gaiman 28). Bilquis' worshiper seems to be an unwitting victim but nonetheless he loses his life while sexually exploiting her and she is subsequently

strengthened. The idea of sacrifice is also explicitly illustrated during Shadow's first meeting with the goddess of Media. She appears to him in the form of Lucy Ricardo on an old "I Love Lucy" rerun he is watching to kill time in a hotel room. Lucy looks out from the television screen and addresses Shadow directly. "Shadow? We need to talk" (Gaiman 155). Shadow is taken aback and asks the obvious question, "who are you?" Media describes herself as "the TV" and as "the little shrine the family gathers to adore" and says "The TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to" (Gaiman 155). When Shadow asks what they sacrifice she responds by saying, "Their time, mostly. Sometimes each other" (Gaiman 155). These two incidents bring the idea of human sacrifice into the book. The producer's self-sacrifice is an almost fitting end for a seemingly rich man looking for a cheap thrill. Media's description of herself as the "little shrine" seems a bit too close to home. Readers recognize themselves and their families in the idea that they "gather to adore" the television. Gaiman's critique forces readers to recognize the idea that Americans sacrifice their time and their relationships with loved ones to the goddess of the television. When they fully engage with the television they disconnect from important humans in their lives. The passive worship of Media is a figurative human sacrifice.

In these two cases with both Bilquis and Media, the sacrificial lambs are willing participants in their undoing. In Hinzemann's Lakeside, however, sacrifices are mysterious killings of children. But, are the killings really that mysterious? Sophie's frustration with life in Lakeside and the loss of her friend seem to suggest that the town passively approves of its annual sacrifice. "I'm leaving this fucking town . . . Alison's gone. Sandy Olsen went last year. Jo Ming the year before that. What if it's me next year?" (Gaiman 283). Sophie's friend Alison is gone, as is Sandy, and Jo Ming. Sophie is suggesting that she will leave town now rather than being the next to mysteriously disappear in the annual sacrifice. "What if it's me next year," asks Sophie, showing that she and consequently the rest of the town, know that each year a singular child disappears. She is considering leaving her home to prevent her own disappearance and assumed death. The entire population is aware that they are giving tacit approval to this sacrifice of one of their children but have a silent pact not to mention it.

The parallels between Lakeside's annual sacrifice and the annual sacrifice in the village from Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," cannot be ignored. "The Lottery" begins on a sunny June day in a small town amid an atmosphere akin to a summer celebration. The

annual lottery is an ingrained part of small-town life despite the fact that “much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded” (Jackson 2). The box from which lots are drawn is old and haggard and ritual singing no longer occurs. This idea of the ritualistic nature of the sacrifice is replicated in Lakeside’s annual raffle for charity that sends a klunker into the icy depths of the lake in the name of a children’s hospital. Both works also place their ritual sacrifice at specific times of the year. Jackson’s lottery happens on a very specific date, June 27. Just at the arrival of summer and the end of the school year, the town assembles to kill one of its own. Conversely, Lakeside’s death takes place in the midst of a frozen winter, but the evidence of the gruesome event disappears as the lake-ice thaws in the coming of spring. Both events usher in a new season of warmth and growth. The towns dispense with the nasty necessities of death to make way for a life of growth and prosperity. These killings are carried out to ensure the continuance of the utopian prosperity of both communities. Old Man Warner represents the voice of tradition in “The Lottery.” When faced with the idea that other nearby towns have given up the lottery he snorts, “Pack of fools,” and suggests that soon the young folks will, “be wanting to go back to living in caves” (Jackson 6). Through him Jackson shows the belief that the town’s very success and civilization depends on the sacrifice of the lottery. “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (Jackson 6) he says. This sentence seems harmless at the time he speaks it, but as readers learn that the lottery is really a violent ritualistic stoning of a community member, it becomes a chilling awakening to the extremes to which people will go to ensure their way of life. “Violence, even sacred violence, can be the tie that binds and defines the community” (Doty 380). Both towns are built on a sense of community that the sacrifice brings. Jackson’s town comes together each year to carry out the act, and Gaiman’s Lakeside cloaks the act in a children’s charity. However, the underlying motivation for this brutal killing, economic prosperity, is at the heart of “The Lottery” and of Lakeside’s child sacrifice. In discussing the pitiful state of nearby towns that exist only for limited tourist money, or dry-up when manufacturing leaves, Callie Knopf tells Shadow, “what I’m saying is Lakeside’s lucky. We’ve got a little of everything here—farm, light industry, tourism, crafts. Good schools” (Gaiman 281). Lakeside’s sacrifice ensures a well-rounded community founded in various sources of economic prosperity. The people of Lakeside seem to have long forgotten the reason for their sacrifice. In fact, they seem able to deny that they even aware of it; despite the fact that Shadow



notices an emptiness to Callie's words. But like Old Man Warner, Hinzemann gives voice to the transactional nature of the action, "I gave them a lake, and I gave them prosperity..." "And all it cost them was one child every winter" (Gaiman 501). The town's prosperity, like Hinzemann's existence, was conditioned on the annual sacrifice of one of its members. As long as the community doesn't talk too overtly about it, they seem to be willing to go along and make the exchange.

Jackson's and Gaiman's stories of small-town utopias, somehow representative of what Carroll refers to as the real America, force readers to consider what and who they sacrifice to the continuance of the American lifestyle. Will they sacrifice a loved one? Or maybe someone else's loved one? Or maybe as Media suggests, their precious time? (Gaiman 155) Both authors ask these questions by creating idyllic small towns built on gruesome truths. When faced with these moral questions, only the most deceitful reader could leave these texts feeling free of the complicit guilt they place on us all.

Ursula Le Guin adds nuance to this moral question of sacrifice in her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Le Guin's utopia, Omelas, is directly described as a dream of perfection. Set, like "The Lottery," on a beautiful day during a festival of summer, "Omelas sounds in my worlds like a city in a fairy tale," (Le Guin 740) it is perfection. It is town full of happiness and joy, and yet, the people "were not simple folk" (Le Guin 740). It is the American ideal, a sophisticated town full of happiness and joy and lacking one interesting quality. "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt" (Le Guin 741) The people of Omelas live a life of happiness free from guilt. That is a dream that must be too good to be true. After Le Guin draws readers in with the description of perfection she explains that the truth of the town is that in the basement of a beautiful building is a caged child. This scapegoated child being is kept in the dark with barely enough food to survive and lives without love or affection. The town's people, "all know it has to be there" (Le Guin 741). The prosperity, the joy, and the happiness of the town are built of the scapegoating of the child. "The terms are strict and absolute" (Le Guin 741) and the town's people, like the citizens of Lakeside and the small town in Jackson's "The Lottery," find a way to accept the terms and maintain the sacrifice. One child is kept caged in appalling conditions in exchange for happiness and joy among the citizenry. Le Guin extends the idea introduced in "The Lottery" some 25 years earlier by focusing not on the people who live in Omelas and maintain such an atrocity, but by considering the ones who walk

away. The final paragraph shifts to the adolescents who first go to see the child and weep for days or the older people who fall silent for a few days then leave. They walk out of town, never look back, and never return. Initially, this ending seems to give readers some moral cover. The idea that some people in the town choose not to be party to such actions is a relief. However, the ones who walk away from Omelas also do nothing to stop the atrocity. They simply turn their back on it. Le Guin speaks to the readers who tell themselves, after reading “The Lottery,” that they would never do such a thing; they would never be party to a gruesome killing. Le Guin asks, would you stop it, or just walk away from it? The truth is that while most people will not actively participate in such a heinous act, most will also not stop one.

Shadow Moon is the one moral man who will return and put an end to the practice of sacrifice that most will tacitly accept. After Shadow’s resurrection, he returns to Lakeside to remove the stain of guilt that sits on the town’s prosperity. He does not participate in the sacrifice as in “The Lottery,” nor does he simply walk away from Lakeside’s practice of ritual sacrifice and never look back like “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” He takes the moral action of returning to Lakeside to expose the killings and free the town to be whatever it will become without Hinzelmann’s godly interference. Shadow walks onto the ice to discover Alison’s body hidden in the trunk of the klunker just as the ice breaks. He is submerged into the depths of the icy lake of Hinzelmann’s creation only to emerge reborn as the town’s savior who ends Hinzelmann’s murderous reign and ensures the future safety of Lakeside’s children.

*American Gods* by Neil Gaiman is more than a mystical fantasy road trip into the American heartland. It is a biting critique of what it means to be American and how one becomes an American. Through the old gods we witness the process of assimilation and the building of community. Immigrants come to the new world and bring with them their old gods and their old customs and cultures. These gods and practices are abandoned over time in favor of a new amalgam of various cultures that become the American culture. The old gods become irrelevant in the face of the new American landscape and travel across the vast country exposes citizens to new ideas and ways of living that they adopt and adapt. Filling the void formed by the loss of the old gods, new American gods rush in and fight for a place in the hearts of Americans. Gods of money, and credit cards fight with the gods of media and technology for status in the lives of Americans.

## *The American Road Trip*

Even as they do, they replace gods of automobiles and manufacturing. Gaiman shows this constant rotation of gods in a cycle of relevance and replacement as a defining aspect of American culture. He asks what is it that Americans value and looks not only at the gods we worship, but at the things we are willing to sacrifice to those gods. This examination is a chilling one. Apparently, maintenance of the American way requires the sacrifice of our time and attention, our fellow man, our community members, and even our children. These sacrifices can be small and unnoticeable or devastatingly horrific and substantial. Through the character of Shadow Moon, Gaiman provides readers with a model for navigating a bleak and corrupt landscape. Shadow's version of an American is an aspirational one. His quest begins in a tragedy and a lack of true identity. The challenges of his journey help him to define himself and his values. He ultimately actualizes in his righteous act of ending the selfish sacrifice in service of prosperity. Shadow's actions challenge Americans to value their fellow Americans more than they value their freedom, security, and prosperity.

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